

A HISTORY OF IRELAND IN 100 OBJECTS, A SELECTION 5TH & 6TH CLASS LESSON PLAN

Mesolithic Fish Trap c.5000BC



It was a very long time ago. A very, very long time ago. So long ago that it's hard to even understand how long ago it was. It wasn't say 50 years ago or a hundred years ago or a couple of hundred years ago or even a thousand years ago.

No, it was 7,000 years ago.

So, we need to take a breath here and think about that. 7,000 years. People were very, very different then. They didn't have the kind of clothes we have now and they didn't have the kind of homes we have now and they didn't speak the kind of languages we speak now. They moved around a lot to keep up with the animals they hunted for food and they spent a lot of time on the lookout for wolves and bears that might attack them out of nowhere. (And yes, there were wolves and bears in Ireland back then!)

But they still had to rest, they still had to sleep and they still had to eat. And although their lives were very tough, we know that they looked after each other and worked with each other and told each other stories.

Stories something like this.

A girl sat in the warm summer sunshine, making a fish trap out of the thin branches of trees that she bent and wove into a cone-like frame. She had watched many times as the grown-ups in her tribe had made traps just like this. They had chatted and laughed as their fingers moved swiftly to force the branches into place. Once or twice, they'd even let her have a go.

But today she was determined to make a trap all by herself.

It turned out to be much harder than she'd expected. Just as she was finishing one section, a branch sprang back into her face, drawing blood below her eye. The girl was stunned and threw the trap away in anger. But her brother had been watching from under a nearby tree. He picked up the discarded trap and set to work fixing the section that was causing the problems.

Some time later, the trap was ready for use. By this time, the girl had returned to the campsite, having cleaned her wound with the leaves of a particular plant. The boy showed the trap to his sister and

together they ran to the lake to place it under the water. But before they did so, they took a sharp stone and put a small gash on one of the branches towards the tip of the cone. There were already three other fish traps in the lake and they wanted to make sure they would know which one was theirs.

That evening they went down to the lake to see if their trap had worked. And can you imagine how they felt when they saw three brown trout wriggling inside?

And so, every day, one or other carefully placed the trap under the lake water, close to the shore.

Until one day it rained and rained and rained. It rained so hard that their campsite quickly flooded. The tribe was afraid that the floods would force the bears and wolves out of their hiding places. They decided to move immediately to higher ground. There was no time to gather all their possessions and there was no time to fetch the four fish traps from the lake.

Now, of course we will never know if that's what actually happened, but we do know for sure – absolutely for sure – that four fish traps were left in a lake. For a long time. Such a long time that the lake slowly drained away and a bog grew up around them and the traps became flattened against the black, soggy turf.

Plants and flowers stretched out of the ground above them. Insects and birds flew overhead. People walked, and ran and shouted and played right on top of them. Animals sniffed and poked and peed in the soft soil close to the wooden cones.

And then those plants and flowers died. And those insects and birds died. And those animals and people died. And others came along. And then they too died and then others and others and others and others and so it went on and on and on, and all the time the fish traps remained still and silent in the damp earth.

Until very, very recently it was decided to build a road in that area. Everything had to be dug up and the soil examined by archaeologists, just in case – just, just in case – there was anything interesting hiding below the surface.